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ABSTRACT

One educator who teaches many writing courses in the writing emphasis at the University of San Francisco has used the film "Pulp Fiction" in four different writing classes, the honors section of a Freshman Seminar, and assorted film courses. This paper suggests how and why teaching this film in classes devoted to writing might make a suitable and productive alternative to using a standard literary text. The paper shows how using "Pulp Fiction" can augment and expand the use of standard written texts to provoke student writing and discussion about student writing. According to the paper, while the author/educator is an advocate of using good essays, stories, and poems as measures of how language works in discourse, he does not always think the average undergraduate will see his/her voice in Hemingway's words. The paper explains that, taking as its major theoretical framework I.A. Richard's claim that rhetoric is a philosophic inquiry into how words work in discourse, the educator's methodology when teaching "Pulp Fiction" in a writing course is to unveil rhetorical strategies and how students might begin not only to recognize these strategies but incorporate their own into their writing. It discusses the ways in which he uses "Pulp Fiction" in his different classes. And it finds that using the film in writing courses can serve as a kind of rhetorical frame through which people can more clearly view the relationship of writing, culture, ethics, and rhetoric. (NKA)

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Get Medieval on Your Class: Pulp Fiction and the Composition Classroom.

By Dean Rader

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (54th, New York, NY, March 19-22, 2003).

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DEAN RADER
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Get Medieval on Your Class:

Pulp Fiction and the Composition Classroom[1]

This is the conversation I imagine:

"You see the program for the Four C's conference this year?"

"Yeah."

"Some guy from San Francisco is giving a paper on teaching *Pulp Fiction* in composition classes."

"No."

"Yeah."

"No."

"That's what it says. Some guy from the University of San Francisco. Giving a paper called "Get Medieval on Your Class." Imagine that.

"No."

"I thought this conference was about writing. I thought it was about composition. I didn't know it was about movies."

Well, if you have participated in such a conversation, welcome to my paper on teaching *Pulp Fiction*. Believe it or not, I have, in fact, used *Pulp Fiction* in the composition classroom though I no longer teach composition. However, I do teach a lot of writing courses in the writing emphasis at the University of San Francisco, and I've used the film in almost all of them.

Over the course of my career, I have taught *Pulp Fiction* in four different writing classes, the honors section of a Freshman Seminar, and assorted film courses. My paper today suggests how and why teaching *Pulp Fiction* in classes devoted to writing might make a suitable and productive alternative to using a standard literary text. I should be clear here—all I'm really talking about is, instead of using, say "A Rose For Emily" or "Shooting an Elephant," one may consider using *Pulp Fiction*. I am not advocating abandoning a rhetoric text or a standard reader in favor of Jules and Vincent, but I would like to show how using *Pulp Fiction* can augment and expand the use of standard written texts to provoke student writing and discussion about student writing. Perhaps, after this paper, you will me tempted to do the same. Perhaps not.

Let me say at the outset that mine is not an argument against modeling. I believe very strongly in modeling. I use model student essays as required texts in my classes, and in our book, we print at least one sample student essay in almost every chapter. I am convinced that when students *see* what other essays like theirs are supposed to look like, they can better conceive and envision their own papers, their own ideas and words doing that kind of work.

What I don't believe is that students will necessarily become better writers by reading better writing. Put another way, I'm not convinced that *only* writing about literary writing will lead to good writing in our students. While I am an advocate of using good essays and stories and poems as measures of how language works in discourse, I don't always think the average undergraduate will see his or her voice in Hemingway's stories. In other words, using solely writing to teach writing often leads to double exclusion—exclusion from the literary text and, by extension, a sense of exclusion from the text to be written.

Increasingly, my approach relies on the idea that we can use critical tools geared towards reading traditional texts for untraditional ones. It is also informed by the modern compositional idea that the personal voice as well as personal experience can be used to write about subjects with which we are familiar. While *Pulp Fiction* is not a traditional rhetorical text, it does feature a sophisticated way of thinking about texts, writing, and the rhetorical moment. Taking as its major theoretical framework I. A. Richard's claim that rhetoric is a philosophic inquiry into how words work in discourse, my methodology when teaching *Pulp Fiction* in a writing course is to unveil rhetorical strategies and how students might begin not only to recognize these strategies but incorporate their own into their writing (Richards 8). In my mind, textual analysis [reading] and textual formation [writing] jointly contribute to the larger process of knowledge making, and in this sense, *Pulp Fiction* is a useful, provocative, funny and socially responsible text for writing pedagogy.

For those instructors who like the idea of using literature to teach writing, let me make an argument for using *Pulp Fiction* instead of a standard American short story or novel. I'll ground this argument in the long history of using complex, non-linear, socially controversial texts to teach writing. In other words, as I suggest above, one can use the standard modes of reading literature to read *Pulp Fiction*—thus, students don't have to learn a new vocabulary.[23] Like most interesting novels, *Pulp Fiction* has plot twists, more than its share of symbolism, good guys, bad guys, seduction, violence, and transgression. Thus, I like having my classes apply a literary approach to reading *Pulp Fiction*. In this case, it functions like Jonathan Silverman's microscope.[4] Students pay attention to the symbolism of the briefcase, the flatness or roundness of Vincent Vega, Jules, or Marcellus Wallace. They look at the framing of Tarantino's shots; they listen to the slang of the characters. The film, then, becomes like a Wallace Stevens poem or a Toni Morrison novel—it is a text to be explicated, unpacked, analyzed. One of the reasons we read and teach literature is to expose our students to a language, a structure, a rhetoric of innovation. Using *Pulp Fiction* in a writing class undergirds this philosophy. It doesn't undermine it.

To wit. When I taught composition, I had a kind of personal mission to eliminate the five-paragraph essay. In fact, I refused to accept tidy 3-point, 5-paragraph pieces. I wanted students to think about using innovation to advance an argument. *Pulp Fiction*, for all its wackiness, is an exemplary text in this regard. It makes a number of arguments, but it works against the stereotypes of form. It irrupts expectations. It does what it is not supposed to do. Tarantino knows what a movie is supposed to look like, how it is supposed to flow, but he undermines this. This gesture not only does not weaken the film or its implicit arguments—it strengthens them. I use this technique in my classes to get my students to rethink and reimagines the dizzying tedious format of most undergraduate writing. If Tarantino's non-linear text can be informative, rhetorical and funny, theirs can too.

But form is not the only way in which *Pulp Fiction* is useful. In a writing class, especially freshman composition, the foot massage scene does good work. As you may remember, Vincent and Jules get into a conversation about the personal and political ramifications of the foot massage. Chances are, you don't want your students replicating this dialogue or similar dialogue in their papers, but you may want them to be as discriminating about language, context, subtext, and meaning as Jules and Vincent. In this sense, Silverman's microscope metaphor works well here, as you would be orienting your students to hone in on how and why precision of language is important.

But this is nothing new. Professors of writing have been doing this for years, and nothing about *Pulp Fiction* makes it unique in this sense. One could do the same assignment with many other movies. Except for one thing—the N word. Suddenly, when read through this lens, *Pulp Fiction* becomes like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, an American cultural text, written by a white guy, but reveling in the use of the word "nigger." Champions of both texts will argue that Twain and Tarantino problematize racial discourse with their incendiary texts, that both retain a realistic mimesis by foregrounding a word that would have been used in that particular situation. If *Huck Finn* or *Invisible Man* can warrant hundreds of poorly spell-checked undergraduate essays on the topic of race, then so can *Pulp Fiction*. What's more, in my classes, students have taken unusually strong but complex stances regarding the use of this word in the

movie, as it has real-time bearing on their own vocabulary choices. When Marcellus Wallace says to Butch, with both tenderness and intimidation, "You're my nigger," students understand the complexities of connotation and denotation, text and subtext, reception and intent in ways that I've not experienced with any other text. Thus, the writing classroom can become a kind of microscope through which to look closely at a text like *Pulp Fiction* in an attempt to arrive at some sort of classification, some sense of understanding, of its inner workings. They are forced to think about how language, how phrases and words become microcosms, metaphors, for entire projects.

But, let's jettison the microscope for the window. Here is where the really interesting work can be done. Kenneth Burke argues that all literature is a piece of rhetoric; I would suggest that all texts are rhetoric and that every moment is a potential moment for writing.[5] In this case, I'm interested in *Pulp Fiction* as a rhetorical text. In the "Rhetoric and Culture" course in USF's program, I use *Pulp Fiction* to teach rhetoric. There are many ways to foreground this. First, one can focus on the text's internal rhetoric. For instance, I look closely at the foot massaging argument between Vincent and Jules. Both engage in rhetorical discourse. Jules tries to establish authority through personal experience, while Vincent goes for logic and reason. Here is a great moment to show students the rhetorical triangle (*ethos, pathos, logos*) in action. In a very real way, Jules grounds his argument in *ethos* and a bit of *pathos*, while Vincent is all *logos*. Or, in a more complex argument, Jules makes a case for the fact that he and Vincent are alive because of a miracle. Vincent, playing the good professor, makes Jules define the terms of his argument, (How is this event a miracle?) which he does. Jules then sets out to rationally explain the irrational—why he is alive and why he is giving up gangsterness. In essence, Jules provides a mini-definitional essay in a seedy LA coffee shop. It's not often in literary texts that we find such compelling rhetorical stances. Sure, we see overt arguments in non-fiction essays, but in poetry and fiction, they tend not to occur as they do in *Pulp Fiction*.

On the other hand, last semester, I taught a class on writing and popular culture, and one of my tasks was to get students to write about pop culture as a means of cultural criticism. Using *Pulp Fiction* in

such a context enables students to see and explore some the truly disturbing contradictions in the movie, contradictions are endemic to America itself: violence, gender roles, class issues, ethics, drug use, morality, loyalty, homophobia, rape, responsibility and capitalism. Each of these issues gets treatment in the film. I'm always happy when a student admits that he or she likes *Pulp Fiction* but has real problems with the implicit and explicit messages of the movie. Articulating those nuances, unpacking those contradictions, speaking what is unspoken is, to me, the nexus of good writing. *Pulp Fiction*, at least in my experiences, remains a good text to help make this happen.

But, more useful is examining *Pulp Fiction's* external rhetoric—that is, what arguments the film makes and how it makes them. In a class in which part of the objectives are to read and make sense of implicit arguments of a given text, analyzing the arguments of a movie like *Pulp Fiction* takes the act of rhetorical investigation to new levels. For instance, if we carry I. A. Richards' now famous definition of rhetoric as "a study of misunderstanding and its remedies" into our viewing of *Pulp Fiction*, then the potential misunderstanding involving Tony Rocky Horror and Mia Wallace seem more than coincidental. Thus, *Pulp Fiction*'s rhetorical stance becomes a kind of window not only into the movie but into the student essay as well. So, in the Rhetoric and Culture course, I use *Pulp Fiction* as an argument about how cultures communicate, how they make meaning.

Lastly, I'd like to contradict something I said earlier regarding modeling in writing classes. Believe it or not, I like using *Pulp Fiction* as a model of rhetorical ethics. One of the core courses in our program is a great class called Ethics, Writing and Culture, and its mission is to examine the ethical responsibilities of writing and communication. Many of the examples I've mentioned so far can fit into this schema, but I'm more interested in the ethics of the film as a whole and how that may translate into an ethic of writing. An argument can be made that *Pulp Fiction* is one of the most ethical movies—or at least ethically aware movies—of the last 10 years. So much of the film turns on ethical decisions characters must make. Does Butch take a dive in the boxing match? Does Vincent have an affair with Mia Wallace? Do they take Mia to the hospital to try to save her life after the accidental heroin overdose? Does Butch

return for the watch from his father? Do Vincent and Jules respect the Bonnie situation? Does Jules kill Pumpkin and Honey Bunny? Does he hold true to his conviction that he is spared by a miracle? And, perhaps the most important ethical decision of the entire movie—and the one we actually see the character struggling with—does Butch re-descend to save Marcellus Wallace from being raped? You can say that we shouldn't take these decisions seriously because they are made by gangsters and hit men, but the reality is, the movie poses important questions about how people should behave in certain situations, and, ultimately, I think, its argument is that even in criminal situations, we are bound by ethics. The movie asks us to move from one subject position to another, and in each one, we are forced, along with the characters, to make ethical decisions, to make an ethical stance, to take, even if internally, a rhetorical stance.

To help students make such a reading of this text is an excellent strategy toward helping them see how texts make sophisticated arguments, but it also can point to an often overlooked component of writing—one that, I feel—gets short shrifted in most writing classes. And that is the role ethics plays in act of writing and communicating. I even think the use of the n-word can fit into this debate in helpful ways. Tarantino argues (as does Randall Kennedy in his recent book *Nigger*) that the film tries to diffuse the word, that by using it in so many contexts and with such frequency and with so little reaction from the characters, that it strips it of its power for racial discrimination and violence. This topic has led to a number of illuminating discussions about language's and writing's ethical responsibilities. It's an easy connection for me to make to suggest that language and composing carry with them ethical responsibilities, ethical choices, ethical awareness.

Watching *Pulp Fiction* over and over, muttering "cool" and memorizing the "Le Big Mac" conversation will probably not make students better writers, but using the film in writing courses can serve as a kind of rhetorical frame through which we can more clearly view the relationship between writing, culture, ethics and rhetoric.

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[1] This paper was originally given at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in New York in March of 2003. I have made some minor alterations, but this version remains very much like the presentation version.

[2] What I mean here is that the standard techniques we ask of our students in literature classes—to read closely, to pay attention to detail, to look for conflict, to be aware of plot devices, metaphor, symbolism and character development—are just as useful when viewing any text, particularly one as complex and narrative as *Pulp Fiction.*

For more information on the connection between *reading* popular culture texts and writing classes, see *The World Is A Text*, 6-8; 45-47.

[4] Jonathan Silverman argues in his paper on teaching pop culture in the writing class that pop culture can be both a window (a lens that gives a broad perspective of larger cultural issues) *and* a microscope (a focused lens that isolates a specific cultural item).

[5] See Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement.*

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